

Hilary Poriss. 2009. *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elliott S. Cairns

Readers may recall the 1998 production of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Metropolitan Opera in which mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli, to much criticism, sang two arias in place of the two traditionally sung by her character, Susanna. Despite the fact that Mozart also composed these two substitute arias and despite the fact that he also composed them for *Le nozze di Figaro* (albeit *after* the original 1786 production in Vienna), Bartoli was largely lambasted by critics and audience members alike. It is fitting that Hilary Poriss would cite this example in her concluding remarks for *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance*, for although not ubiquitous, the practice of aria substitution was, at one point, not uncommon. Unfortunately for Bartoli, the practice is no longer in vogue: modern audiences by and large desire a musical experience as close to the "original" as possible, and this cannot possibly be furnished by allowing the "egocentric" whims of the diva to undermine the authority of the composer. Poriss, however, questions this "natural" inclination towards fidelity to the composer's authority, suggesting that "a composer's authority is not the only authority worth reasserting." She continues: "Singers, too, played a vital role in shaping individual operas, and it was with their aria insertions that they raised their voices most powerfully" (188). Perhaps there is a historical precedent for giving divas the freedom and flexibility that they demand, without complaint from opera administrators, directors, and others on the creative team—but this might initiate a fall down a slippery slope, provoking even more unrest within the opera house through a validation of the power trips and tantrums already known to occur behind the scenes.

In sharp contrast to the Bartoli controversy, Poriss begins *Changing the Score* with an anecdote about nineteenth-century prima donna Anna De Lagrange (1824–1905). Like Bartoli, De Lagrange also stepped onto the stage to sing an aria as a substitute for another, but unlike Bartoli, De Lagrange "thrilled her spectators, who applauded loudly and called her back to the stage for three tumultuous curtain calls" (3); unlike Bartoli's alteration, that is, De Lagrange's did not elicit boos. "The explanation for this elated response," Poriss writes, "is simple: . . . De Lagrange was participating in a tradition that originated during the seventeenth century and persisted into the second half of the nineteenth century. Defined simply, 'aria insertion'

is the practice that allowed singers to introduce arias of their own choice into opera productions” (3). In *Changing the Score*, Poriss seeks to trace the practice of aria insertion and its role in performances of *bel canto* operas during the first half of the nineteenth century, the “pivotal stage . . . during which the practice inched slowly toward extinction” (5). It was during this time that singers of Italian opera had to confront the rise of the “work-concept” as described by Lydia Goehr (1994), either asserting their own authority in performance by attempting to perpetuate the practice of aria insertion, or surrendering their authority to that of the composer’s “original” vision. It is this conflict that drives the study, for Poriss uncovers various ways in which singers continued to interpolate and substitute arias despite the resistance they encountered when challenging the regulative power of the work-concept.

In the first chapter, Poriss contextualizes aria insertion as it was practiced during the first half of the nineteenth century. In particular, she examines the emerging discourse that attempted to impose new limitations on the use of such arias—or eliminate them altogether. “Singers of the nineteenth century still used aria insertions during these years [1800–1850], but hints of this new approach”—the approach that understood Italian operas as unified “works”—“began to be felt early on, limiting when they used aria insertions and what arias they chose to perform. Even though singers were still permitted to make these changes, in other words, the ground rules for doing so were shifting subtly beneath them” (15). Much of this discourse was bound within a contest for power and authority among singers, impresarios, and composers, a contest that paralleled the debates regarding the “workness” of the artwork itself. As Poriss notes, “most criticism of the era suggests that aria insertions inhabited a middle ground where the tension between the identity of the artwork as a performance or as a ‘composition’ was acted out” (35).

The second chapter functions as a case study, focusing on prima donna Carolina Ungher (1803–1877) and her relationship with Donizetti’s *Marino Faliero*. The underlying narrative of the chapter is of Ungher’s “quest” to find the perfect entrance aria for her character, Elena, because, as Poriss writes, “the ability to make a fabulous entrance is one of those critical elements that separates the iconic diva from the rest of the pack, a skill that all actresses and opera singers cultivate, but that only exceptional ones master” (37). Poriss couches Ungher’s “quest” in the by now familiar terms of performance versus composition, firmly situating Ungher’s insertions in the aforementioned “middle ground.” Regarding performance, it is unsurprising that the diva would be searching for an entrance aria that “would function most effectively as a showpiece for her talents” (40). The unexpected turn,

then, is the argument Poriss makes for Ungher's "second concern," one that looks to honor the opera as a singular composition: "the need to determine which aria conformed most effectively to the dramatic and musical shape of *Marino Faliero*" (41). Poriss examines each of the three arias used by Ungher, reading into the progression a "trying on" of each and rejection of the first two before finally settling on the third as the "musical vehicle that was ideal not only for [Ungher's] own voice, but for the drama itself" (63). Poriss examines the scores as well as the libretti in order to support her argument, citing such musical elements as range and level of difficulty as indicators for the relative suitability of each aria for Ungher's voice, and looking at thematic links—both musical and textual—between the arias and the opera in order to determine how effectively each of the arias "fits" into the larger work.

Poriss' third chapter introduces the concept of "favorite insertions," a term she coins to describe "arias that were employed as substitutes or interpolations *by a host of different singers* in an assortment of operatic contexts during the nineteenth century" (11; emphasis added). She puts forth this concept in an effort to "problematize the concept of the trunk aria" (66)—arias that a particular singer could effortlessly substitute or interpolate at a moment's notice, for she carried them around in her metaphorical "trunk"—suggesting an alternate explanation for aria insertion. As in the previous chapter, Poriss uses a particular prima donna as a case study, this time examining the aria insertion habits of Giuditta Pasta (1797–1865). Of particular interest is Pasta's relationship with the aria "Il soave e bel contento" from Giovanni Pacini's *Niobe*, an aria that she (and others) frequently interpolated into other operas. Poriss looks to the aria's textual and musical characteristics in an attempt to explain why this aria was so popular, but more generally, it does not seem to be the text and music so much as the success of tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini with the aria in *Niobe*'s initial run (it was originally composed for a male character), his subsequent interpolation of it into productions of other operas, and his performing it in "numerous concerts"—in short, the popularization of "Il soave e bel contento" at the cords of someone else—that prompted Pasta to "adop[t] it as one of her own warhorses" (95). In the end, Poriss notes a trend wherein "favorite insertions . . . often had direct links to one or two famous singers," and "these prima donnas and leading men set the 'fashion' for their contemporaries, authoring not only particular operatic moments, but also popularizing a sample of arias from which other singers occasionally drew" (96–97).

Chapters four and five both discuss operas in which aria insertion became standard (Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, respectively). The fourth chapter again focuses on one prima donna

in particular, this time Maria Malibran (1808–1836), and the exceptional degree to which she extended the aria insertion practice: instead of just substituting one aria for another, she, as well as fellow co-star Giuliettas, substituted the entire “tomb scene” from Bellini’s opera with the corresponding scene from Nicola Vaccai’s *Giulietta e Romeo*. This chapter probes not only the question of why Malibran made this replacement in the first place, but also the question of why others followed her lead. Poriss’ discussion in the fifth chapter, on the other hand, looks to explain why the “lesson scene” of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* came to be a scene in which substitution was more or less the norm, but, unlike *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*’s “tomb scene,” there seem to be almost as many arias substituted as there were prima donnas performing the role. Poriss argues that prima donna Adelina Patti (1843–1919) was particularly influential in altering the “meaning” of the lesson, substituting not only one aria for Rossini’s “Contro un cor,” but, rather, introducing two, three, or sometimes four different arias, in what Poriss calls the “mini-concert approach” to aria insertion.

In the final chapter of *Changing the Score*, Poriss returns from discussions of actual performances of insertion arias to the discourse surrounding the practice, focusing on the anonymous short story, “Memoir of a Song,” first published in 1849 in the London-based journal *Fraser’s Magazine*, in which the narrator is, remarkably, an insertion aria. The story, as its title suggests, is a quasi-autobiography, a collection of the aria’s “remembrances” of things past. It begins:

I am an old song now, and have been often sung. Mine has been a long and brilliant career; and though now put on the shelf amid the dust of departed forefathers, let me, ere I sink into annihilation, retrace the early years of my glorious being, when I flew triumphant from throat to throat, roused the heart, and filled the eyes of men with tears of gladness, sympathy, and love. (189)

“Though this story was probably read by thousands,” writes Poriss, “it appeared on the periphery of the *bel canto* tradition, a reflection of, rather than an active participant in, aesthetic change.” She continues: “Like the lesson scene of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, however, it provides a glimpse of the ‘afterlife’ of aria insertion, this time from a perspective that shifts past one individual opera toward broader aesthetic issues concerning the relationship between singer and song, image and actuality, opera and audience” (170), and these “broader aesthetic issues”—such as the notion of the autonomous art-object and the question of artistic creation—are what Poriss investigates in her analysis. This idiosyncratic text is included as an appendix following the study proper, published here for the first time since its initial appearance in 1849.

Poriss roots her study in a wide variety of source materials, from musical scores to performance reviews, published writings to unpublished archival documents. Her argumentation is easy to follow and her writing is elegant, which, in addition to the intriguing subject matter, make *Changing the Score* an enjoyable read. The book represents a shift in focus from composer-centric musicology to a musicology that acknowledges other agents who participate in bringing an operatic work to life, in the process complicating the very notion of what the operatic work might be. At the same time, it plays nicely into the efforts of recent feminist scholarship to acknowledge the contributions of female artists—figures who have largely been overshadowed in musicological writings by the (predominantly) “genius” male composers. While the reader might notice the occasional typo, some ill-chosen homonyms (e.g., “theoretical *principals*” instead of (the correct) “theoretical *principles*”), and poor image resolution on score examples, these minor detractions should not deter one from reading Poriss’ commendable study.

References

Goehr, Lydia. 1994. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.